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Council says no to employee raises

Leggett, unions could go back to the bargaining table

by Erin Cunningham | Staff Writer

Montgomery County's police and firefighters will not receive the pay raises they were due in fiscal 2011.

The County Council voted Tuesday not to uphold any provisions of collective bargaining agreements that would cost the county more money. Now, officials from all three government employee unions will return to the bargaining table with County Executive Isiah Leggett (D).

"We cannot uphold what we bargained," said Councilman Marc Elrich (D-At large) of Takoma Park. "Nobody thought at the time that the agreements were made that we would be faced with this [recession]."

Those agreements included \$1.2 million in pay increases for county police and as much as 11.5 percent in pay increases for firefighters in fiscal 2011, which begins July 1. The pay plan for firefighters was adopted in fiscal 2007, while the contract including pay raises for police was approved earlier this year after an arbitrator stepped in.

The police contract also includes provisions for higher pay (an extra \$3,500 per year) for helicopter pilots if a controversial program is started in the county, and more pay for multilingual officers, who were to receive an additional \$3 per hour.

The vote of the full council came after a unanimous recommendation from the council's Management and Fiscal Policy Committee not to fund provisions that members of the Fraternal Order of Police Lodge No. 35, the IAFF Local 1664 Career Fire Fighters and the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 1994/Municipal and County Government Employees Organization were to receive in fiscal 2011 under negotiated agreements.

Councilwoman Duchy Trachtenberg (D-At large) of North Bethesda, who chairs the committee, said the county's \$1 billion budget shortfall made the provisions unaffordable, and that council members had to recommend that they not be funded.

Union leaders and Leggett will have 10 days to reach another agreement.

Leggett did not include pay raises for any employees in his \$4.3 billion fiscal 2011 budget proposal.

"The bottom has dropped out, and we just simply cannot spend revenue we don't have," Councilman George L. Leventhal (D-At large) of Takoma Park said of the county's budget situation.

Leventhal said that even though the council was unable to fund negotiated contracts for union members, collective bargaining is still a valuable process.

"My only hope is that the management side of the bargaining table will provide stiffness and resolve,"

he said.

Had the last employee contracts included agreements that were affordable over the long term, the council would not have had to say, "no," Leventhal said.

"Everybody knew that things were going to be worse, and not better," he said.

Since Leggett took office he has been working to reverse "unsustainable trends in county government in terms of fiscal conditions that included collective bargaining contracts," said county spokesman Patrick K. Lacefield. "That was long before the council discovered that there was a problem.

"George is preaching to the choir, and we're glad he's coming along on that," Lacefield said of Leventhal's comments.